

# “You are Beloved, a Blessing and Favored!”

*Isaiah 43:1-7 & Luke 1:26-38*

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December 1, 2024

**Prayer for Understanding** Affirming God, how often do you speak to us, and how often do we miss it? How often do you whisper blessings over us that we refuse to hear?

Open our hearts. Create space in us to not only hear these words, but to believe the good news tucked between them. We are hungry for your wisdom, so speak to us now. With hope and curiosity, we listen. With hope and curiosity, we dare to begin again. Amen.

You are beloved, a blessing and favored!

Mary is described as “blessed”. She is neither wealthy nor powerful and yet she is chosen to bear God’s child. Her story begins with blessedness and so does ours, for the prophet Isaiah declares that we are claimed by a God who calls our name. We are a blessing, because we belong to God. When blessedness is our beginning, we begin to see the world—and others—through the eyes of a God who says: “You are precious in my sight.”

God speaks through the prophet Isaiah. This reading uses select phrases and is adapted. **Isaiah 43:1-7 Select Phrases** “Listen to the Lord who created you. The one who formed you says, “Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One, your Savior. You are precious to me. You are honored and I love you. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will gather you and your children. I have made you for my glory. It was I who created you.”

In a world often drenched in pain, suffering, and injustice, it is a gift to remember that we are formed and made by a God who loves us and does not leave us. After hurricane Helene in Augusta, Georgia Presbyterian Disaster Assistance provided aid in many ways. During a break, a group of people gathered. Pastor Jim facilitated a conversation drawing on the wisdom of consolation and desolation by St. Ignatius. I refer to this as a high low prayer. When we are walking in consolation, one sees God’s grace abounding everywhere. Desolation is struggling to see the presence of God in anything. Recognize brokenness in the world and recognize goodness. Those who experienced the devastating effects of the hurricane shared their highs, their consolations, and their lows, desolations. Brandi spoke of a person killed by the storm and how everyone came outside to help their neighbors. I went into neighbors’ houses I have never been in. We had a fish fry together. Casto shared that all of a sudden people came together. A woman shared. Local food banks had been pretty empty in recent months and now they are full again. Ed shared that his phone was blowing up with people asking, “How can I help?” People showed up. It was an abundant affirmation of God’s grace. Rees told the story of the first time the congregation worshiped together following the hurricane, on World Communion Sunday. A friend who owned a restaurant opened it just for St. Andrew. It was good to be back together. Asked to name some of the desolation, one person said, “We still do not have internet or phone service.” Another said, “It is the destruction.” It is still not safe to travel. Some roads are now one-way because of all the debris.” Rees said, “The impact on our natural world. It is hard to get used to all the trees that have been lost. You get accustomed to the canopy, the shade, and now it is not here anymore. It will be somebody else’s lifetime before Augusta looks the same.” Their stories expressed a weird balance of grieving what we lost and being grateful for what we do have. The group went back and forth from consolations to desolations. Gratitude for a visiting tree crew. Destroyed homes. A person with a smile delivering homemade banana bread. Loss of restaurants. The quick deliverance of Presbyterian aid. The overwhelming need. A pastor took a picture of downed trees and asked, “Will these bones live again?” And then answered, “The Spirit of God is moving. God heals. Trees will grow again. Green will return. Birds will nest again.” Amy shared her concern about trauma memories. The next time we get wind, almost all of us will freak out. James replied, “Let us acknowledge the loss, own the lament, and rejoice in the Lord who is good, steadfast and our strength forever. Storytelling helps us move forward. Leave space to connect and tell stories.” Castillo shared how disasters are apocalyptic events. Disasters reveal things people are not talking about. Disasters bring people together. Disasters get people talking about how to create a loving community. Praying high and low prayers, consolation and desolation, together helps everyone perceive God’s love, God’s transformational presence, in the midst of crisis. Praying together is crucial for some are

unable to perceive God on their own in their dark night of the soul. Ignatius encourages us to use consolations wisely to store these experiences in our minds, hearts, journals, and shared stories to draw on when we need hopeful encouragement. Be aware of your feelings, what alters your feelings, and where your feelings are taking you. Ignatius believed that God does not create desolation. God gives us tools to move from desolation to consolation. Many find recalling their experiences of God, their highs, their consolations, to be a life raft that buoys them through the floods of life. You are precious in God's sight. Imagine God gazing upon you, delighting in all that you are. You are a blessing. Let that truth buoy you as you breathe each new breath.

Today after worship, while enjoying fellowship or hanging the greens, share with someone one of your highs, a consolation and a low, a desolation and then listen as they share. In a world often drenched in pain, suffering, and injustice, it is a gift to remember that we are formed and made by a God who loves us and does not leave us.

Kayla Craig writes, "The Advent journey unfolds like a well-worn quilt, each patchwork piece lovingly threaded across time and space. In each thread, we find blessed assurance that with every sacred stitch, God has been loving us all along. Advent reminds us that, what some may see as discarded scraps, the Maker of heaven and earth calls beautiful and blessed. Mary, an ordinary girl from the obscure corners of Nazareth, was not cloaked in power or prestige—but was blanketed in belovedness. And that was enough. Advent invites us to reflect on how we, like Mary, are invited into God's redemptive narrative—no matter how ordinary or small we might feel—for each of us has the potential to carry God's love into a weary world."

A reading from the gospel of Luke: **Luke 1:26-38 NLT In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" But she was much perplexed by Gabriel's words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. "Do not be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And Jesus will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!" Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What is more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail." Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her."**

The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you! Do not be afraid for you have found favor with God!" This greeting is for you, and for everyone. You are favored by God. You are beloved by God. God is with you. God delights in you. God is blessing you. God is calling you to bless the world by receiving God's love, embodying God's love and sharing God's love. You have an essential and unique place in God's family.

When Mary heard she was beloved, blessed, and favored, she was very perplexed and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Mary was a young unmarried woman, a person with little value as society was concerned. She lived in Galilee, an outcast region, too isolated to worship in the temple, a region fraught with uprisings, poverty, and protests. The area was overrun with immigrants and people marrying outside of their religion. Mary was taught that she was sinful, unworthy, and useless. And God declared Mary to be beloved, blessed, and favored.

Perhaps you are also perplexed when God says to you that you are beloved, blessed and favored, because life is hard and people have said negative things to you. Far too many are told—implicitly and explicitly—that they are a burden instead of a blessing. All are beloved, blessed, and favored is a message that gets muted, trivialized, and redacted. Hustle culture, scarcity thinking, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, often hinder our ability to see ourselves and others as beloved, blessed, and favored. When one struggles to see themselves as beloved, blessed, and favored, often they struggle to see others as beloved, blessed, and favored. Conversely, when we are rooted in our blessedness, our ability to treat every created being as a blessing expands. Perhaps you are perplexed, because you have self-doubt and struggle to see the glory, God's image, in yourself. Let go of your negative self-talk. Let go of negative messages. Let go of shame. In a world of desolation hear this consolation. God is saying to you: "You are beloved, blessed and favored." Savor these words and let joy flowing from God's delight in you permeate.

Mary is affirmed by the angel. Mary exhibits agency saying, “How can this be?” Mary gives consent saying, “Here I am . . . let it be with me according to your word.” Mary made a choice to be a conduit for God’s love taking on flesh in Jesus. God honors free will. God is blessing you. God gives you a choice whether or not you will share your blessings. Are you giving consent for God to bring more love into the world through yourself?

Pastor Lauren Wright Pittman was depicting God blessing Mary and reflected: “As I attempted to create imagery, I found myself in tears. What if my fully embodied self, including the most human parts of me, are not only acceptable but beloved by the creator of the universe? As I drew, I felt a few steps closer to accepting the steadfast, limitless, unconditional love of God that I claim to believe in, but have yet to fully receive. What resulted was an image of Mary and Gabriel in a warm, intimate embrace. Mary has a peace to her that is like a wave of relief over her whole being. A kaleidoscope quilt pattern surrounds them and patterns Mary’s clothes. If we could open ourselves up to receive the incomprehensible love of God, maybe we would constantly feel wrapped up in a soft, cozy, lovingly-stitched-together quilt. Favored one, God delights in you—every single bit of you. Never forget: you are a blessing.”

Young adult Presbyterians were asked how to improve church life and the world. Ariyah Sadler answered: “Loving your neighbor does not just mean to love the people who are immediately around you or people who are like you or in your community. Love is not just an emotion, a feeling. Love is a commitment. Love is wanting the best for the other people in this world, regardless of background, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, ability, any of these things.” The young adults agreed to speak out when people use Christianity to promote hate and to provide space for conversation about issues before shutting people down. Ariyah said: “Use your anger as motivation to change and create something new and something different and something better for the people around us.” Olivia Phelps said: “Empower each other across the world.” Leon Bee Wang spoke about the importance of remaining true to oneself and overcoming negativity. Rosa Ramirez said: “Understanding bias, recognizing your privilege and learning how to confront the harm that you have caused. Pay attention to how we are harmed and also how we harm people, so that we can continue to move forward and work together, because if we are not aware of our bias, we cannot really work together.” Adonis Johnson talked about being compassionate and supportive to counteract how draining life can be and said: “Do not use your negativity to tear somebody else down. Instead, flip that negativity and turn it into something positive. You never know what somebody else might be going through.”

You are beloved, blessed and favored. How will you bring love into the world?

Kayla Craig writes: “We often feel compelled to earn our worth and belovedness, but the One who grants each breath affirms our inherent worth. In light of God’s infinite love, we are beloved, the very fibers of our being woven with care. We cannot work our way to receiving God’s compassion. God’s love is already here—as present as the twinkling stars in the sky, as near as the clouds of breath on a cold night. You are a blessing because the One from whom all blessings flow sees you, knows you, and calls you by name. When you are facing impossibilities, as Mary did, it is not your productivity or power that will push you through, rather the grace of God. This divine assurance does not clarify every outcome or guarantee a life of ease—Mary’s path was fraught with challenges. Yet this promise of Love that makes a way when there is no way offers us hope that we do not face our challenges alone. As we journey into the Advent season, may you rest under the warmth of these truths. By embracing our inherent blessedness as a starting point, we open our hearts to recognize and affirm the blessedness in others, which transforms our interactions and communities. God’s perfect love invites us to live out our belovedness by transforming our world with love and entering into the good work God’s hand began weaving many years ago. This Advent, consider your sacred place within the divine quilt. You are a blessing—known, chosen, and called for a purpose. May you boldly live into this truth, recognizing and cherishing your inherent worth so that you may honor God’s image in others. Trust in your belovedness as you enter the redemptive work God has invited you into this Advent season.”

You are a blessing! A poem by Sarah Speed: “You are a blessing. If you hear nothing else, if the wind howls, if your brain runs amok, if rebuttals and denials line up like little toy soldiers, then hear this—you are a blessing. I knew it the first moment I met you / heard your name / learned there are 7 billion of us on this planet. I knew it in my bones, the way my feet know the way home. You are a blessing. For our creating God breathed life into your being. And there is simply no way that, along with that life, some of God’s goodness did not slip right in. So tell the rebuttals to rest. Tell the toy soldiers to find another hill, because this one is reserved for joy and celebration. You are a blessing. Breathe it in.” Amen

